



A call to show up

THE

stick with it

THIRD

and walk through

VOICE

life's hard stuff with students

ASHTON PETERS

THE THIRD VOICE

A Call to Show Up,
Stick with It,
and Walk Through Life's
Hard Stuff with Students

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Gospel Publishing House

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A VOICE IN THE VOID

We don't have to look far to realize there's a void of godly voices in modern youth culture. When we look around and see students struggling with self-harm, gender identity, as well as depression and anxiety, to name a few, we can see the void of godly voices. Youth are part of the "most connected generation," yet a generation of young people who feel alone and, for many, abandoned. There's a void of Christ-honoring love, biblical discipleship, and authentic mentorship. There's a void of spiritual mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, who deeply love a generation and want them to be all that God calls them to be. There's a void of third voices.

A LOT OF NOISE, BUT FEW VOICES

I believe that students' lives today are filled with more noise than ever but few voices. The reality is that we live in a generation inundated with noise. OneHope recently released some interesting information about Gen Alpha/Gen Z:

- 57 percent own a tablet and 43 percent a smartphone—this is even higher among teens.¹
- The average screen time is 2.24 hours a day for kids under eight² (Imagine what it is for teens!)
- 25 percent use Alexa or another smart speaker every day.³ This means that children now speak to Alexa more than to their grandparents.
- Dr. Shell Melia describes Gen Alpha by saying, “Everything is coming at them all the time.”⁴
- They find AI to be friendly, trustworthy, and smarter than they are.⁵
- 46 percent of seven-to-twelve-year olds have an active social media account.⁶
- 64 percent of Gen Alpha said they would rather be a YouTube/social media influencer than the president.⁷ (This one is wild to me!)

These statistics confirm my point: There’s a lot of “noise” in students’ lives, but very few voices. Students are surrounded by people who entertain them, market to them, distract them, and even disciple them with a specific (detrimental) brand of cultural values. No wonder we need people who will emerge as a godly influence and be the third voice in students’ lives! Young people today are constantly surrounded by information, and their minds are filled with narratives. The modern youth ministry must be committed to being more than a social gathering that happens midweek, but instead be a place of discipleship and spiritual formation.

OneHope also identified that only 46 percent of children in the United States live with both parents who are in their first

marriage, which means 54 percent of those under the age of eighteen live in some form of a nontraditional family unit.⁸ In those cases, the need for youth ministry to be a powerful third voice is even greater since the parent's influential "second voice" is often missing.

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When there are no Christian parents, the third voice becomes even more crucial. In their American Worldview Inventory, the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University discovered that 67 percent of parents of preteens identify as Christian, but only 2 percent possess a biblical worldview.⁹ Even if that number is exaggerated—which some think it is—it still shows a staggering chasm. It demonstrates a powerful need for youth ministries to partner with parents and be fully present as a supplemental voice in students' lives. (Later in the book, we'll take a deeper look at the need for youth ministry to come alongside the family with a strong voice of influence.)

THE THIRD VOICE: THE ANTI-ALGORITHM

The concept of algorithm has taken on a new meaning in the last few years. The Oxford English Dictionary defines an *algorithm* as "a procedure or set of rules used in calculation and problem-solving operations, especially by a computer."¹⁰ For years, *algorithm* was more of a calculation or computing term, but it has entered into modern slang.

Most often, the term is now used in the context of social media, referencing the social media algorithm that provides the information or entertainment you want.

Recently a popular cookie franchise came to our town. A large portion of my social media activity during the weeks prior to its opening revolved around this cookie franchise. (I know . . . I have a problem.) My social media feed was filled with videos about the cookies, advertisements, reviews, recipes to make imitation versions, you name it—everything was about those yummy cookies that, with one cookie, will meet your recommended entire calorie intake for the day. That’s how the algorithm works—it finds your interest and feeds you pertinent information and content. Your interests or clicks are almost weaponized against you. Whatever catches your eye is the tunnel you go down.

I think of the third voice as the “anti-algorithm.” As we take time to get to know students and invest in their lives, we don’t give them the information they *want* to hear but instead, the information they *need* to hear. Unlike groups that market to students or distract them, we challenge students to become more like Jesus. Hear me out on this. I’m not saying social media is bad. It can be good entertainment, but it’s an awful discipleship strategy. It can be great for cookie and movie reviews, but when it comes to spiritual formation, students need individuals who know and love them to walk them through the discipleship process. Algorithms can answer the question about where to find the best pizza (or the best cookie), but they can’t answer questions about depression or sexuality. Though YouTube can provide some fantastic guitar tutorials, young worship leaders need to be mentored by people who see their life and character and challenge them to be more like Jesus. It’s a reminder of 2 Timothy 3:2–5 (AMP):

For people will be lovers of self [narcissistic, self-focused], lovers of money [impelled by greed], boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy and profane, [and they will be] unloving [devoid of natural human affection, calloused and inhumane], irreconcilable, malicious gossips, devoid of self-control [intemperate, immoral], brutal, haters of good, traitors, reckless, conceited, lovers of [sensual] pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of [outward] godliness (religion), although they have denied its power [for their conduct nullifies their claim of faith].

Whatever catches your eye is the
tunnel you go down.

Even Christian influencers within the social media world can have a mixed effect on students. You see, I'm grateful for sermon clips. My feed is often filled with a lot of them, but those sermon clips and theology sound bites can't disciple anyone. I recently increased my respect for one Christian influencer. During an interview on a variety of topics, he was asked how many people message him theology questions and discipleship-oriented questions. His response was interesting: "I DM them back and say you need to connect with your youth pastor about this." He emphasized that preaching and sharing the gospel online is extremely valuable, but when it comes to spiritual formation, students need someone consistently in their lives to answer their questions. They need someone they see each week. (We'll consider influence and voice in more detail a little later in the book.)

We Need Voices.

Voices that are targeted intentionally—full of truth and seasoned with grace.

Voices that desire transformation more than platforms.

Voices that desire to be faithful rather than famous.

Voices that speak in the void.

Voices that will not preach to people but sit among people.

Voices that are committed to seeking out those without a godly influence and speaking to the void.

Voices that will speak to a generation that is hurting and searching for identity and point them to the Creator.

Voices that will say to the fatherless and broken, “Though you feel like you have no home—you have a place among us.”

Voices that will nurture rather than entertain.

Voices that not only speak about love but show love.

Voices that will step among the abandoned and the orphaned.

We need . . . THIRD VOICES.

JULIAN’S STORY

I met Julian the night of our annual Fall Outreach (Battle of the Schools). One of the students from our leadership team

invited him to participate. Since it was one of our more significant events, we encouraged students to show up early for activities and a cookout before service. Since lots of students came right from school, a good chunk of them dropped their backpacks near the front entrance. As the pile of bags crowded in front of the door, I started to move the bags to the side. Julian, whom I had never met before, hopped right in to help. I quickly greeted the seventeen-year-old. He had straight black hair with a unique cowlick in his bangs that most people have at the crown of their heads. His slightly crooked teeth formed a quick smile. I was intrigued (and grateful) for someone who would so eagerly step up to help.

Julian quickly became a big part of the youth ministry. Getting involved with the production team and putting the “pro” in ProPresenter, he was a significant part of the student leadership team. He would show up early and stay late. I would stop by the campus club and connect. Through the process, I learned that Julian had never met his biological father and I was pretty sure his mom wasn’t married to the man she was living with. I endeavored to be a consistent third voice in his life, encouraging him to pursue Jesus and answering questions he had about faith and following God. Julian was the first person to give me a Father’s Day card (this was before we had kids of our own). I still have the card to this day:

Happy Fathers Day! You are the best father-youth pastor ever. I am so glad you are in my life. I don’t know what I would do without you! Thank you!

— Julian

Our family shared many special moments with Julian. Though he came from an extremely poor family, he was always generous with everything he had. He had pulled together what little money he had to pay for his senior photos and wanted us to be there for them. Since he only had a few changes of clothes, he asked if he could borrow some of my clothes to use for his senior photos. When I responded with an “absolutely,” he worked through the closet and decided what he would like to use. He also invited me to go with him on the day of his senior photos, and I did. I attended his graduation to cheer him on.

As time passed, he felt called to pursue youth ministry. He went on to intern at our church and became my right hand. We sponsored him through Global University to receive his ministerial credentials.

During that season, Julian shared a lot of significant life events with us. I have a photo of him sitting with a few other people and my older daughter as we waited for my younger daughter to be born. Julian didn’t just feel like family, he was family. When my younger daughter was born, we were already in the middle of our ministry transition to Illinois, and he was prepping to take a youth pastor role in Florida.

About a year after we left our ministry assignment in Oklahoma, I woke up to multiple voicemails. It was from the amazing youth leader who had followed us as youth pastor. She asked me to call her as soon as I got the voicemail. News had made it to her that Julian was found dead at his apartment from an aneurysm. Our shock and grief were huge. Bear in mind, this was within a year of Jake’s passing, the story I shared in the introduction. This was grief piled upon grief. I had barely worked through Jake’s passing and was now caught off guard by Julian’s passing.

Don't worry—not all my stories end in death! But I start this book with Jake and Julian's stories for a few reasons. First, they were two of the best young men we ever encountered in youth ministry, and I'm deeply grateful for having been a part of their lives. Second, these stories remind us that eternity is real. Yes, we all know that, but when we minister to students, it can be easy to lose sight of eternity because we tend to operate on the notion that they have a full life in front of them. Third, it speaks to how deeply I believe in being the third voice.

There was immense grief and even discouragement with the loss of these two students in my first five years of full-time youth ministry. It would have been easy to wonder why I should continue to make the investment. It might have been natural to shy away from youth ministry for fear of the pain it could bring. Instead, it helped me decide that I would continue to speak deeply into students' lives with passion and tenacity regardless of the risks.

About a year after Julian's passing, I received this message:

Ashton,

God has recently called my husband and me to help with a new church, Impulse, in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida. It's crazy how small the world can be in God's big hands. I know one of your spiritual sons, Julian, was a huge part in building this church. When our son, Michael, was in a "Dream Team Meeting" and met Julian, he mentioned that he had gone to Jeanne's [Jeanne Mayo] Master's Commission and Julian lit up!

Sadly, we didn't start attending Impulse until opening Sunday, and since the Lord took Julian home so quickly

after that, we never got to meet him. Yet, I feel I'm getting to know him through testimony after testimony of people who came to our church because of Julian. Last night, I was with another young man who had been touched by him. Dominic is one of my son's friends and is part of a leadership program at another church. He still has the card Julian gave him, and he remembers their brief encounter.

Our young church is growing. We have an average of 150 people showing up for our Sunday services and many new believers! Our youth ministry started up in December with a core of twelve young people. Last month at the first event, thirty-eight students showed up. I feel this is part of Julian's legacy.

Though I never met him, I know Julian was one of those special people who wholeheartedly loved God and loved people. He continues to touch many hearts here.

Thank you for your investment in his life.

This message reminded me that the investments we make in students' lives continue; the third voice echoes. Though at times I've wondered if mentorship, discipleship, and investment made any form of eternal impact, I know they did in Julian's life. Matthew 13:8 reminds us, "Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." When we invest in students for the sake of God's kingdom, we can be sure of a bountiful harvest.

The investments we make in students' lives continue; the third voice echoes.

THE THIRD VOICE ECHOES



- What are some of the “noises” you see that fill students’ lives?
- Go back and reread the “We Need Voices” statements. Let them be the rallying cry for you today.
- Ask the Lord how He might want to use you as a voice in the lives of some of the students in your youth ministry.

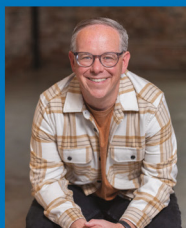


A CALL TO SHOW UP, STICK WITH IT, AND WALK THROUGH LIFE'S HARD STUFF WITH STUDENTS

In a world filled with noise, students hear countless voices—entertaining them, distracting them, and shaping their beliefs in ways that pull them further from the truth. They are the most connected generation in history, yet they feel more alone than ever. Anxiety, self-harm, identity struggles, and hopelessness are becoming the norm. But there is one thing missing—a **third voice**.

The **third voice** is the mentor, the guide, the spiritual leader who speaks life, truth, and biblical wisdom into the next generation. Whether you're a youth pastor, small group leader, mentor, or simply someone who cares deeply about today's students, *The Third Voice* is a guide to stepping into that gap.

Through research, practical insights, and real-world application, this book empowers youth leaders to show up, stay consistent, and walk with students through the challenges of life. It's not just about teaching—it's about **investing, discipling, and loving in a way that transforms lives for eternity.**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashton Peters is a graduate of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary with a master's in Ministry and Leadership. He and his wife, Stephanie, have two daughters and reside in Springfield, Missouri.

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